

Cave Archaeology and Environmental Spirits

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IN THESE days of advancing science, to believe in environmental spirits is to be branded as superstitious. But believe it or not, environmental spirits or *engkanto* have been helping Museum archaeologists in the Philippines to preserve some prehistorically used caves.

The people living near the caves are afraid to enter them, because of the environmental spirits or *engkanto*, and the latter are to be pleased and befriended if not avoided, or they will harm the people.

In Can-Aybong del Remedio Sulat, Samar, for example, the environmental spirits are known as *maligno* or *mala compania*. They live in caves as well as in big balete trees found at the edge of the forests.

The rural people in Can-Aybong consider these places as enchanted, and therefore they must be avoided if possible.

According to the old folks in the area, the *maligno* or *mala compania* were people whom God punished a long time ago because they displeased Him; they disobeyed His wishes. To teach them a lesson, they were made to live a life different from human beings.

Comparatively, the *malignos* are big in size. They have extraordinary powers and strength. They possess power, like the ability to make mortals sick, to remain unseen except by their favorites, the *herbolarios*, and the power to make anyone do their bidding and wishes. To their favorite human beings they can bestow the power to cure, to have extraordinary strength, and to make one invisible before any other man.

The enchanted residents of Can-Aybong usually exchange pleasantries with their counterparts living in a big balete tree in Mt. Magnawa, San Julian, about an hour boat ride from Can-Aybong. They exchange visits, bringing with them gifts, and at other times just talk over a box of chewing materials locally known as "*mama*" *mon* or "*mama*" *men*.

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Like human beings, the *maligno* also hold festivals. They invite friends to come and partake of what they offer or serve. At times favored human beings or those that caught their fancies are invited to those affairs. To illustrate this point a case may be cited.

Ticio, a human resident, sometimes stays for several days inside the cave, until somebody fetches him. Unless this is done he forgets to return to his family. His neighbor Tero (another favorite of the *maligno*) usually takes him out of the cave when he disappears. When his friends and neighbors ask him why he stays in the cave, Ticio answers that he likes the good food and the company of the *maligno* inside the cave.

Certain sections of the forest, including the animals in it, are the exclusive property of the *maligno*. To hunt in these preserved areas is tabooed and can only be done after performing certain rituals and offerings or sacrifices. The ritual paraphernalia normally consists of a cooked hen or rooster and tuba. Hunting in their domain without their approval is to incur their hatred. The violator is generally punished in the form of lingering illness which at other times leads to death.

There are instances when the *maligno* can be seen by ordinary mortals. They usually take human forms and in some cases they appear in animal form as birds, deer, snakes, etc. A case may be cited to illustrate this point.

One day Timo, a boatman from San Julian, took three priests to Can-Aybong. It was raining hard then. After a while he noted that his passengers were not wet, while he was drenched to the skin. Nearing Can-Aybong he saw, to his surprise, that the area around the caves was lighted. After conducting his passengers to the place they wanted to go, he left. When he looked back after a few minutes, the area around the cave was no longer lighted. It was dark all around.

The *maligno* at times play jokes on people. They throw stones to frighten them. At other times they clear the path or trail leading to the forest, so that wood gatherers and hunters would find it easy to go in. Once the latter are inside the forest, the *maligno* restore the cleared area to its former stage, making it difficult for the men who entered to get out. In a situation like this the victims are at the mercy of the *maligno*. For people who know the right prayer, or *oración*, which is usually in Latin, there is no difficulty in freeing themselves in a situation like this. For those who don't know the technique, it is very difficult, if not disastrous.

If the *maligno* are in a playful mood their victims will not find their way out of the forest for days or weeks. Here is where the favorite of the *maligno* comes in, for he alone can remove them from their predicament. He also cures the victims of any illness they might have contracted while being the object of the *maligno's* playfulness.

The help of the *maligno's* favorite is also requested by families of persons or individuals who happen to be detained by the *maligno* in their dwellings. Usually those who are detained by the *maligno* are handsome men or beautiful women who happen to catch the fancy of female or male *maligno*. The *maligno* also detain those who eat foods prepared by them. People who have taken some property of the *maligno* without their consent are also detained.

The required ritual for the release of detained persons is for the families of the victims to approach a favorite of the *maligno*. The victims' family give the *herbolario* a cooked hen or rooster and tuba. The *herbolario* upon receiving these gifts goes to

the spot where the victim was last seen. He chants an *oración*, after which he places the offerings on the ground, at the same time talking loudly to the spirits, asking them to release the victim. If the *maligno* are pleased, the victim is released at once, if not, they will require their favorite to chant the *oración*, and ask for more offerings. Generally, the victim is released after a request has been made. The position of the *herbolario* must be protected because he is the only link between the *maligno* and human beings.

One harmful effect of being a favorite of the *maligno* is that after a long association with them, one loses his sanity. In this way, one can hardly communicate with fellow villagers. The favorite's sanity can only be restored if he is blessed by a priest and anointed with holy water. This ritual will sever his connection with the *maligno*.

At nighttime, especially when it is dark and there is a slight shower, the people living near the caves say that they can hear music emanating from the caves. They can also smell food being cooked. This indicates that the *maligno* in the caves are entertaining visitors.

A would-be groom can borrow ornaments and utensils from the *maligno* if he makes the proper request. The procedure to be followed in making a request is that the borrower has to bring a plate covered with a white cloth near the opening or mouth of the cave. Then he has to ask the *maligno* to lend him the things he will need for his wedding, enumerating them one by one. This must be done before sunset or before the angelus rings. The next day, at about the same time, he brings with him a hen or rooster with black feathers, black skin, and black scales. He places this offering near the mouth of the cave and repeats his previous request. If he is favored, the things needed by him will just appear at the spot where he had previously placed the plate covered with white cloth.

The borrower is under the obligation to return the borrowed articles, for failure to do so will mean sickness to either the groom or his bride. Another punishment imposed by the *maligno* for an erring borrower is to detain him or his bride in the cave. In some instances, the first-born child of the couple is taken by the *maligno*.

In these ways, the *maligno*, or environmental spirits, help preserve some caves for the archaeologist.